DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 053 111 TE 000 632

AUTHOR Baugh, Albert C.
TITLE Historical Linguistics and the Teacher of English.
PUB DATE Nov 62
NOTE 5p.
JOURNAL CIT College English; v24 n2 p106-110 Nov 1962

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *Cultural Enrichment, *Diachronic Linguistics, *English, *Language Development, *Literature Appreciation

ABSTRACT

The value for teachers of an introductory course in the historical development of the English language is justified. The teacher's ability to read understandingly and enrich the student's understanding of what he reads presupposes some knowledge of the political and social history which constituted the background against which are read the great works of literature. Words reveal the changes in the manners, the customs, the thoughts and attitudes, the very life of man, as they have taken place over the course of time. What the teacher of English should realize and make full use of in the classroom is that some of the rules of grammar that run counter to the student's habits and instincts rest not upon linguistic but upon social sanctions. In sum, the value of historical linguistics to the teacher of English falls under three heads: as an element in his or her cultural equipment, as a tool in the understanding and interpretation of earlier literature, and as the basis for sound judgment in matters concerning the language today. (CK)

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY Author + Nat'l Coun. of Teachers of English TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE U.S. OFFICE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER."

College English
Vol. 24, No. 2,
November 1962.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

ED053111
TE 000 632

Historical Linguistics and the Teacher of English

ALBERT C. BAUGH

For more than fifty years at the university with which I have long been connected a one-semester course in the history of the English language was part of the normal English requirement, along with composition and literature, of practically all undergraduates—not merely those in the College of Arts and Sciences but those also in the schools of fine arts, commerce and finance, education, and engineering. I estimate that during this period upwards of fifty thousand students have gone out of the University of Pennsylvania having had an introductory course in the historical development of their mother tongue. I believe they were the better for it. I regret to say that such a course is no longer compulsory except for English majors, but the tradition lives on, and the course is still taken by an encouraging number of non-English majors as an elective. If, as is so often the case, many of us inherit our politics and our religion, I suppose I may say that I have inherited my belief in the value of some knowledge of the historical evolution of English. With me this conviction is an article of faith.

But I am here today not to defend a creed but to justify it, and while what I have to say seems to me to apply in a measure to all who are liberally educated, I shall concern myself, as I am expected to do, more particularly with the needs of the teacher of English. It is well to emphasize at the outset that the history of language, and particularly of one's own language, is a liberal study. Indeed the history of anything which reflects the activities, the concerns, the progress of mankind is a part of that all-embracing subject which we call history in its larger sense. The interest in history is a reflection of that curiosity about his own past that is one of the distinguishing characteristics of man as compared with the other animals. It is natural that the English teacher, whose function is so often to arouse the student's interest in literature and to make it meaningful to him, should be broadly cultivated in all aspects of man's struggle and achievement. For this reason some historical perspective in music, painting, the forms of architecture, and other aspects of culture is taken for granted and is often exemplified to a high degree. Likewise the teacher's ability to read understandingly and enrich the student's understanding of what he reads presupposes some knowledge of the political and social history which constituted the background against

Mr. Baugh, professor of English at the University of Pennsylvania, read this paper at the annual meeting of NCTE November 24, 1961.

which we read the great works of literature, whether it be *The Canterbury Tales*, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, or *The Waste Land*. And the history of one's mother tongue, even if it did not have practical value as a tool for the teacher of English, would still demand a place alongside the history of art or music in his overall culture.

But unless I am much mistaken, what you would most like to hear about is the practical value of a knowledge of the history of English, what it can contribute directly to your teaching. Most of you are engaged in the teaching of literature, but every teacher of English, whether primarily concerned with literature or not, knows that questions of grammar and usage are constantly coming up in the classroom and outside. I shall therefore consider this aspect of the topic under two heads: What does historical linguistics contribute to the teaching of literature? And how does it enter into our judgments on questions of language today?

There are some—shall we say the old-fashioned among us—who suspect that great literature ceased to be written at about the time they began to teach; that the books issuing in floodlike proportions each year from the press are ephemeral, will enjoy in some cases a brief vogue and be heard of no more; and that only those books and writers that have found their place in histories of literature are worthy subjects of classroom instruction. That this attitude is unreasonable need hardly be said. But we all know that contemporary literature has such a natural appeal that one of our problems is to convince the rising generation that there are also good books, enjoyable and enriching books, that were written yesterday and the day before and the day before that. Now the contemporary book puts little or no linguistic impediment in the way of understanding. Our problem here is merely the problem that we face in encouraging the reading habit in general, the competition with a host of other forms of entertainment. Our problem is to convince the younger generation, in which the reading-habit is nowadays less often developed, that books are fun, and that in addition to the pleasure that they give they leave behind a residue of ideas and understanding that has a great deal to do with making us the kind of person we are. And one of the difficulties that we face is the result of changes in the language.

One such difficulty is that words do not always convey the same meaning today that they once did. When the student reading *Henry V* comes to the passage in Act V where Henry proposes to kiss Katharine, the French princess, and she demurs on the ground that it is not the custom in France for ladies to be kissed by gentlemen before marriage, he is both startled by the custom and puzzled by the use of the word *nice* in the king's reply, where it has its usual meaning "foolish" in Shakespeare, as in Chaucer:

> O Kate, nice customs curtsey [bow] to great kings . . . we are the makers of manners, Kate; and the liberty that follows our places [results from our exalted rank] stops the mouth of all find-faults; as I will do yours, for upholding the nice fashion of your country in denying me a kiss.

It is often not difficult to get *a* meaning out of Shakespeare, but it is another thing to get *the* meaning. Similar instances of changed meaning exist on every page of Shakespeare. Not to be aware that such changes occur in language is not to realize the possibility of misunderstanding the text. Before we can interpret the text correctly to others we must be sure that we have correctly understood it ourselves. And we must acquaint our students with this phenomenon of language, make them contemporary with an older work of literature in language as in custom and

ideas, which is one of the justifications for teaching literature. Without such justification *teach* is a strange word to use with literature, which is meant to be enjoyed. We do not teach a chocolate nut sundae.

As English teachers we are by implication interested in words, for words are the things with which we deal, and words have histories which are interesting in themselves, quite apart from the value which a knowledge of such histories has for the proper understanding of literature. When unraveled they reveal the changes in the manners and customs, the thoughts and attitudes, the very life of man, as they have taken place over the course of time. How fascinating such a study can be was revealed a century ago by the little books of Dean Trench, *English Past and Present* and *The Study of Words*, and at the beginning of the present century by the similar work of Greenough and Kittredge, *Words and Their Ways in English Speech*. To be oneself fascinated by the history of words is one of the surest ways of spreading the contagion to one's students and often arouses in them an interest which leads to the further study of language. Such an interest makes the encountering of old words and old meanings in literature not a distraction or impediment to the reading process but gives the reader an additional satisfaction and a sense of pleasure in the comprehension of what he reads.

But it is not alone in meaning that words undergo change. They change also in pronunciation and accentuation, and it is necessary to recognize this fact in the reading of earlier verse. The long vowels especially have undergone great changes since Old English times so that where King Alfred said *stān* we say *stone* and where he said *cu* we say *cow*. In the fifteenth century a broad series of changes, known as the Great Vowel Shift, altered the pronunciation of all the long vowels. We become particularly aware of this when we read Chaucer, since by the time of his death in 1400 this series of changes had scarcely begun. Consequently in his poetry the long vowels still had their continental value (as in German or Italian) and *ye* (eye) rimes with *melodye:*

> And smale foweles maken melodye,
> That slepen al the nyght with open ye.

and *toun* (town) rimes with *confessioun:*

> And eek with worthy wommen of the toun;
> For he had power of confessioun.

In the case of some vowels the changes which were begun in the fifteenth century were not completed until well on in the eighteenth century, and a word like *heat* was still pronounced *hate* by Shakespeare and Dryden, and even Pope could write in the *Rape of the Lock*

> Here thou, great Anna! whom three realms obey
> Dost sometimes counsel take—and sometimes Tea.

All these seeming anomalies, from the point of view of the modern reader, are accounted for in any history of the English language. The principles are easily grasped, and the teacher of English should have at least a nodding acquaintance with them. Sometimes less obvious are the changes that have taken place in the accentuation of words. Since they often do not appear in rimes and affect only the meter, we are inclined to pass over them as a slight wrenching of the accent by the poet. But when Polonius in his advice to Laertes says

> And these few precepts in thy memory
> Look thou charac'ter

he is speaking good Elizabethan English. The teacher who has read a good history of the English language should not be startled to find Shakespeare saying *persev'er, demon'strate, aspect', envy', welcome'*, etc., though at other

times he may pronounce some of these words as we do today.

Changes in vocabulary and meaning, pronunciation and accentuation, are only some of the most obvious divergences from present day English which the teacher may be called upon to explain. There are also interesting differences of grammar and idiom. Since they often pose no problem of understanding, they may pass unnoticed or even be considered misprints. When the fool in *Lear* says

> The hedge-sparrow fed the cuckoo so long,
> That it had it head bit off by it young

we may wonder if he is talking baby-talk or the printer had run out of *s*'s. But it is neither. It reflects a time when the possessive case of *it* was *his* and various experimental substitutes were being tried. The earliest instance of the pronoun *its* that has so far been found is in 1597, and it was at first slow in being accepted. There is no instance in all of the King James version of the Bible, and so we read *If the salt have lost his savor, wherewith shall it be salted?* There is no possessive *its* in any play of Shakespeare printed during his lifetime (though there are a few in the First Folio). Therefore Portia says *How far that little candle throws his beams!* Although Milton lived until 1674, there are only three instances of *its* in all his poetry.

There are equally interesting differences in the verb. Today we would not say *they runs*, but when Shakespeare says *Whose own hard dealings teaches them suspect the thoughts of others* modern editions often change the text to *dealing*. But *dealings teaches* is the reading of the First Folio and is neither a misprint nor a solecism. It represents a plural form of the verb quite common in London English at the end of the sixteenth century. There are differences of idiom which turn upon the use of the verb. Instead of *Is execution done on Cawdor?* we would say *has been. Goes the king hence today?* would be *Does the king go?* or *Is the king leaving?* The extensive use of progressive verb-forms —*I am speaking, the house is being built* —is a relatively late development. Shakespeare says *What do you read, my Lord?* The natural idiom today would be *What are you reading?*

Perhaps the greatest variety of differences is in the idiomatic use of prepositions. Chaucer provides an abundance of examples, but Shakespeare offers just as many: *I'll rent the fairest house in it after* (at) *three-pence a bay, one that I brought up of* (from) *a puppy, the pity of* (about) *him, I am provided of* (with) *a torchbearer, that did but show thee of* (as) *a fool.* Earlier English omits the article (definite or indefinite) in many constructions where it is now called for: *creeping like snail, in number of our friends,* etc. But I have given enough illustrations to show you that without the historical perspective the teacher's attempt to explain the text of much earlier English literature will be but a form of groping.

In turning to the teaching of language itself I believe that the most important service I can perform is to condition your thinking about questions of current usage. Much of the English teacher's effort is spent in trying to eliminate from the student's speech habits which are summarily dismissed as "bad grammar"—*it's me, I don't want none, I seen it, if I was you,* and the like. On such matters we are likely to be dogmatic. Now I am not against dogmatizing in the classroom, provided it is enlightened dogmatizing. Where we are dealing with accepted dogmas of grammar we cannot avoid laying down what is considered the law. But we should realize that it is often not linguistic law but social law that we are dealing with. Linguistically some of our most cherished rules of grammar

have very little justification. *It is me* has almost as long a history as *it is I*, while the condemnation of the double negative has an even more dubious foundation. There are hundreds of double negatives in Chaucer and Shakespeare. The condemnation of the double negative is due to the eighteenth-century grammarians, who did not know enough about the linguistic process to realize that their function was to record accepted usage rather than to legislate. They did a good bit of harm. They attempted to decide questions of grammar on the basis of Latin grammar and what they considered reason. In the case of the double negative they reasoned that in language as in algebra two negatives make a positive. This was nonsense; language is often unreasonable. When the man in the street says to his butcher, "I don't want none of that there meat I got here yesterday," he does not mean that he wants another tough steak. He is saying emphatically that he does *not* want any more, and this is what the double (or triple) negative has meant throughout the history of the English language. It has been a more emphatic negative and it is a pity that we cannot use it today.

What the teacher of English should realize and should make full use of in the classroom is that some of the rules of grammar that run counter to the student's habits and instincts rest not upon linguistic but upon social sanctions, that for those who are ambitious to advance themselves economically, socially, or professionally it is to their self-interest to eliminate from their speech or writing those features which will impede their progress. As Bernard Shaw says in *Pygmalion* (or, if you wish, *My Fair Lady*), "People know very well that certain sorts of speech cut off a person for ever from getting more than three or four pounds a week all their life long—sorts of speech which make them entirely impossible in certain professions."

All of us realize that in matters of language we do not exercise our function in the classroom alone. Every teacher is called upon to settle questions of grammar and usage. The very fact that he or she teaches English leads the layman to suppose (often quite rightly) that he knows the answers to his questions and therefore to turn to the English teacher for authoritative decisions. If you happen to teach in a college or university in a large city, you will answer one or two telephone calls a week on matters of usage. They will come from doctors, lawyers, dentists, advertising agencies—and you won't send them a bill "for professional services." (Perhaps some of the advertising agencies would do well to call more often.) Many of these questions involve functional varieties and levels of usage. Some have to do with neologisms such as *I will contact him*. You may condemn this use of *contact* on certain levels of usage if you wish, but ten years from now you will be wrong. The language is full of just such instances in the past of the making of nouns into verbs. I am here pleading for an enlightened, a liberal, attitude toward language on the part of the English teacher. Such an attitude, in the final analysis, rests not on the temperament of the teacher but on linguistic perspective.

And so I would define the value of historical linguistics to the teacher of English under three heads: as an element in his or her cultural equipment, as a tool in the understanding and interpretation of our earlier literature, and as the basis of sound judgment in matters concerning the language today.